ACADEMIA | Letters

Students with Special Educational Needs and reading through the school library

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Introduction

Society demands more and more that the school develops skills in students so that they become agents of change in the surrounding reality. The provision of quality education has been a concern of all those involved in the educational process, which cannot, and should not, be separated from a principle-based on equal opportunities for all.

The education of children with Special Educational Needs in regular classes has led to profound changes in the education system, as a consequence of legislative and organizational changes, and consequent changes in educational practices. The concept of inclusive school is based on one premise: an education for all, which promotes respect for differences and individual pathways, and the entire school community must be committed to the process of teaching and learning for all students. An inclusive approach requires an organizational philosophy aimed at developing differentiated methodologies/strategies, cooperative/collaborative work among teachers, coaches, and families, appropriate educational measures adjusted to the students, human and technological resources to enhance their human potential.

The issue of functional diversity and Special Education is crucial from the point of view of educational equity and social cohesion. The development of a coherent, integrated and systematic response to this problem requires knowledge of the different educational issues (Correia, 2008). Currently, information travels to the farthest corners of the planet at a speed once unthinkable and the technological means are progressively more diverse and effective. Be-

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cause of this fact, the school, as the institution best qualified for the role of educating/training the individuals who make up the society in which we live, must be able to keep up with this accelerated development of knowledge and motivate all students, with or without the need for adaptations in the process of access to the curriculum, throughout their schooling.

Reading, Teacher-Librarian, and School Libraries

When the student communicates through verbal language, develops dialogue situations, reveals experiences, confronts opinions, perfects the act of speaking, reading, and writing. As Sequeira (2000) points out, the importance of contact with books becomes fundamental for children, since through reading they learn a new sense of the world and the value of communication. In addition to the formative aspect, reading allows the student to discover himself, others, and the things around him.

By appealing to social values and norms, reading plays an important role in transmitting the principles of tolerance, respect for difference, and constructive and responsible participation in society. On the other hand, according to Amor (1993), the imaginary component of reading contributes to the resolution of psychological and social uneasiness in the individual, as well as to the individual's growth and affective maturity, allowing for a balanced integration in the community. In this context, school libraries are one of the educational resources where teachers, students, and other educational staff can obtain information to develop cognitive skills or simply for leisure.

The importance of reading in the overall development of students as active members and participants in the construction of the school curriculum has led the Ministry of Education to implement educational policies that meet the need to improve literacy levels of the school population, both through the National Reading Plan and in teacher training with the National Plan for the Teaching of Portuguese Language. Patte (2001) presents some of the problems that school libraries will have to overcome in the future if they want to contribute to a true info-inclusion of all students, specifical communication with its users is no longer humanized, relegating this function to technology; growth blocked by installed routines, rigid rules, filing techniques, and preconceived recipes; lack of long-term development projects; functioning by imitation, counteracting the need for differentiation; the provision of functional facilities and neatly arranged bibliographic resources, without concern for the cultural relevance of their initiatives to the school and social community; their obsession with attendance statistics and book lending, ignoring the reading or research tasks performed by their users.

Given this scenario, the teacher-librarian is the central axis in the transformation of the school library, since he/she can be the guide par excellence in the process of personal and so-

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cial development of the student with functional diversity, in promoting the pleasure of reading, but also of writing; making the library one of the central axes of the process of educational inclusion. School libraries, considering the contribution of their documentary funds, audiovisual and computer equipment available to the teacher in the school space, can serve as a link between students and learning.

Based on this premise, César (2003) considers that in a school of all and for all, the actions of each of its elements influence the performance of other members of the educational community (students, teachers, parents, staff), since they should not act in isolation. Participants in the inclusive education process should pay attention to the pedagogical coherence of the didactic activity, the meaning assigned to the speeches, the expectations of educational actors, and the dynamics that develop in an environment of true sharing. Pires (2017) states that the creation of inclusive school libraries implies an ongoing cooperative relationship between all elements of the educational community so that available resources are placed at the service of learning for all, promoting, through internal policies and flexible and inclusive strategies, participation and educational success, based on equal opportunities.

Conclusions

At a time when literacy is of central importance in the development of contemporary societies, the experience of reading is interconnected, not only in the know-how implicit in the professional demands to which individuals are subjected, but in the improvement of their quality of life, when we think that reading can provide us pleasure, comfort, and intellectual stimulation. The school library is an element of the organization of the school establishment.

Therefore, it can constitute itself as a pole of pedagogical renewal, communication, cultural animation, stimulation of knowledge, and development of critical thinking in the students. The creation or transformation of school libraries into inclusive libraries will be, unequivocally, a way to take advantage of the available documentation to maximize the academic skills of students with functional diversity, with results that will become evident in the development of work inclusion of citizens with cognitive, visual, auditory or motor differences. It is in this scenario that pedagogical differentiation emerges as a key element in the work of the school library concerning promoting reading skills in students with functional diversity. As Morgado (2004) highlights about pedagogical differentiation, this new paradigm assumes itself as a factor that conditions the need to change the traditional model of school, including the library, capable of providing a diverse and quality education to the students who attend it, respecting the differences to which they are intrinsically linked, as advocated by the Law no. 54/2018.

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The first edition of the IFLA/UNESCO (2002, p.17) Guidelines for school libraries states that the teacher-librarian should "(…) help teachers deal with heterogeneous situations in the classroom by organizing specialized services for those who need more support and for those who need more encouragement."

However, the issue of collaboration continues to be transversal throughout the Portuguese educational system, with greater expressiveness in the relationships between teachers. In the dynamics of the action of the school library, the answer to the essential question of the promotion of reading among students with functional Special Educational Needs should include, in a first-line, an educational partnership between the elements of the Special Education teachers, the class teachers, and the student's families. The implementation of initiatives to make the school library more motivating for reading and not just as a place to spend time should, in our view, be considered in the Educational Project, in the planning of the Domains of Curricular Articulation defined by the School Councils and more broadly in the Annual Plan of Activities of each school. It is possible to encourage students with functional diversity to read through the school library, provided that the way they access the library is taken into account.

The strategies to be followed should take into consideration not only the reading performance levels of these students, but other factors such as their centers of interest, the style and pace of knowledge acquisition, and the use of available assistive technologies that are attractive and effective in the teaching and learning process of students with certain limitations in functionality, activity, and school participation, as well as their social, economic, and cultural background. Silva (2000) considers that school library involvement activities can have an extracurricular character, including teachers from the school who know how to work as a team (others than the students' teachers), carrying out the activities in the students free time, in small groups, and ensuring that the results obtained are evaluated and disseminated to the school community.

The teacher-librarian is the one who can open the doors of reading to students with intellectual and often social and economic disadvantages. But giving the same to everyone in the school library context is not respecting the individuality or responding to the educational needs of each student, it is rather promoting info-exclusion, something that the inclusive school has to eradicate if it wants to be truly democratic.

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